# IS SEEING BELIEVING?

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The question 'Is seeing believing?' can be answered 'Yes' if 'believing' is appropriately redefined and 'No' if it has its ordinary meaning. This is not the explicit view of George Pitcher, whose new book, *A Theory of Perception*, follows Armstrong's earlier work in maintaining the thesis that perception is to be analysed in terms of belief, where 'belief' presumably maintains its ordinary meaning.[1]

It is customary nowadays for any book on perception to explain what is wrong with sense-datum theory.[2] There are good reasons for rejecting the sense-datum theory, but there is a tendency to throw out the baby with the bathwater. In Pitcher's case, the baby is certain uses of the word 'looks,' which some claim exhibit intentionality and which others claim to be connected with the sensuousness of perception.[3] The sense-datum theorists, for example, emphasized the latter, even when not succeeding in explicating what exactly they were trying to emphasize.[4] Pitcher fails to eliminate grounds to allege the existence of these features[5] successfully. By showing this failure, which is part of the failure to make out the case for the 'seeing is believing' thesis, I hope to prevent a new inadequate behavioristic orthodoxy from replacing the old inadequate sense-datum orthodoxy. I shall deal exclusively with Pitcher, rather than with Armstrong, since their primary thesis is the same, and the former's book is more sophisticated, having the benefit of a decade's work in philosophy that Armstrong did not have.

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Pitcher begins his central chapter, "Evolution of the Theory," by showing that perception and belief are at least intimately connected. We don't consciously think about the things we come to believe in perceptual situations, but we are clearly acquiring beliefs all the time. Thus, as I open the sugar bowl and peer inside, seeing the sugar, I come to have the belief that there is indeed sugar inside. Pitcher wants to go further than this, and *identify* "certain perceptual states of a person . . . with his being in a certain kind of belief-state."[6] The sort of belief involved in perception is "perceptual belief."[7] Perceptual beliefs are nonconscious: to be held they do not require conscious consideration; and they are to be analysed dispositionally. The notion of 'perceptual belief' does not seem terribly important in the early stages of the theory's evolution, for two reasons. First, the criteria stated for them—being nonconscious and subject to dispositional analysis—seem to apply to most of our beliefs. Second,



Pitcher doesn't employ the notion in some of his early definitions, e.g., "a person's perceiving something is nothing but his causally-receiving [i.e., being caused to have] via (or by using) his appropriate sense organ(s), certain true beliefs."[8]

The natural objection to make to a definition like this one is that we may have many nonconscious beliefs, and that having them is not at all like perceiving something. My beliefs about my age or about my profession, or about who is President of the United States are all quite unlike perceiving. Yet Pitcher claims to find such an objection "entirely without merit."[9]

To meet the objection, Pitcher leans heavily on perceptual beliefs. He now makes it clear that the thesis that seeing is believing concerns *these* beliefs, which are alleged to be far richer than ordinary nonconscious beliefs.

> A person's belief about what his age is, for example, consists almost exclusively of a disposition to act in a rather limited variety of purely linguistic ways—i.e. to do such things as say "sixty" when asked what his age is (to put it far too crudely). Even the simplest sort of perceptual belief, on the other hand, consists of a highly complex disposition to act, or behave, in a wide variety of ways, among which linguistic behavior figures only peripherally if at all.[10]

Insofar as this claim is about normal nonconscious beliefs, it is simply false. Surely, to take Pitcher's example (and to assume some dispositional analysis of belief), my belief that I am sixty consists of dispositions other than verbal ones, e.g., my disposition to be careful not to overexert myself as I did when I was young, my making fairly elaborate plans for my impending retirement, my thinking about the sixty years I have lived and the events which occupied them, etc. In general, it is just false that having a belief is being disposed to behave "almost exclusively" in "purely linguistic" ways. This is perhaps more obvious in cases like that of believing a flood is impending. Pitcher's attempt to hold that perceptual beliefs are richer than ordinary ones thus fails because ordinary beliefs are as rich as he claims perceptual beliefs are. The objection that one may have beliefs without being in a perceptual state still stands.

Pitcher offers a second, and stronger, reply to this objection, however. He points out that his thesis is not that perceiving is the *having* of beliefs, but that perceiving is the *acquiring* of beliefs via one's sense organs. Suppose that by looking at a vase of flowers one can tell what colors and shapes it has, "that is, if you causally-received, by using your eyes, certain true, but probably nonconscious, beliefs about the vase of flowers—then I would say that you certainly saw the vase of flowers. . . ."[11]

While avoiding the previous objection, this statement of sufficient conditions for seeing is subject to an objection in the form of a

counter-example. Suppose one turned his eyes in the direction of a vase, and reported only true descriptions of that vase, but also reported his experience as being of a series of written words, the reading of which furnished those true descriptions. In this case, no seeing *of the vase* takes place, though Pitcher's condition is satisfied. We might say that this case points to a certain sensuous feature needed for seeing the vase, a feature the presence of which Pitcher's statement fails to guarantee. We shall return to this case below.

Pitcher sees the main problem with his analysis arising from the fact that we may have several different perceptual situations in which we acquire the same perceptual belief. Thus, I look at the mountains in the morning and they look grey; I receive the belief that they are roughly grey. In the light of the setting sun, the mountains look red, yet I still receive the belief that they are grey. To accomodate such features of our perceptual experience, Pitcher needs to analyse locutions employing the word 'looks.' He chooses the following locution: "IIA: It looks to someone, Q, as if there is an x at place u,"[12] admitting that other 'looks' locutions are more difficult to analyse but claiming (without support as far as I can see) that "it will be fairly clear" that similar analyses can be performed for the more difficult cases.

Now IIA is appropriate in a number of situations. Pitcher calls First Cases those in which the perceiver does not question that there is an x at u. His analysis is "Q causally receives, by means of using his eyes, the (perceptual) belief that there is an x at u." ('Perceptual,' as we have seen, fails to appear in some of Pitcher's analyses, appears full blooded in others, and here makes a guarded appearance.) This analysis is modified because of cases like that of using one's eyes to feel the shape of an object. The revised analysis is "Q causally receives, by means of using his eyes in the standard visual way, the (perceptual) belief that there is an x at u."[13]

Now this analysis of IIA is subject to the same sorts of counter-examples mentioned earlier in connection with Pitcher's analysis of 'see.' A person may use his eyes in the standard visual way to acquire the belief that there is a tree outside his window; if he does this and reports his experience to be that of *reading*, however, it will not *look* to him as if there is a tree outside. To exclude this sort of case, Pitcher makes heavy use of the concept of "perceptual belief." How does this concept help exclude the case just cited? Pitcher explains what he means by a perceptual belief

> one that corresponds exactly, in its content and in the degree of its richness (or complexity), to the state of Q whereby it looks to him as though there is an x at u. To put the same thing more bluntly: by a perceptual belief that there is an x at u I mean one that a person has when, in First Cases, it looks (in the phenomenal sense) to him as though there is an x at u.[14]



We have seen reason to hold that mere complexity or richness will not distinguish perceptual beliefs from others. Pitcher seems to realize this and thus offers a definition of "perceptual belief" that will guarantee its connection with an object's looking a certain way. His definition achieves this connection at the cost of blatant circularity, however; 'looks' are defined in terms of 'perceptual belief' and 'perceptual belief' in terms of the way things look. Since seeing is analysed in terms of the way things look[15] this circularity infects Pitcher's entire enterprise.

Pitcher recognizes the circularity of this account, but thinks he "need not be embarrassed here" because he "suspects that any philosophical theory of perception must share this feature." The only support for this view which he gives, however, is a brief unconvincing argument to show that sense-datum theories have this feature.[16]

Even if both the sense-datum theorists and Pitcher's analyses of IIA are circular, this is more damaging to the latter than it is to the former, for Pitcher wants to *eliminate* the ground for thinking that ordinary language 'looks' locutions commit us to intentional objects.[17] If he doesn't analyse such locutions into some which clearly don't involve commitment to intentional objects, then he has failed. His circular definition of perceptual belief fails to accomplish this task. The sense-datum theorist need not mind this consequence, since many such theorists did not feel the need to eliminate intentional objects. Moreover, even if the sense-datum theorists' analyses are as circular as Pitcher's, this may be held to give evidence for the view that both theories are unsatisfactory and ought to be dropped in favor of another theory altogether. Pitcher doesn't seem to have considered this possibility.

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Pitcher has analysed seeing and looking in terms of belief, but only by introducing a new expression–'perceptual belief'–which in turn is defined in terms of the way objects look. This analysis cannot fairly be called, as Pitcher does call it "interesting and informative."[18]

I believe that any similar attempt to analyse knowledge in terms of belief is doomed to failure. Our intuitions here are sound–seeing is quite different from believing. I suspect that any 'seeing is believing' theorist must either leave his theory open to counter-examples such as the one discussed above, or he must covertly introduce the concept he wants to define in terms of belief.

One final problem with Pitcher's theory deserves mention. Infants presumably see things in certain places, e.g., they see dolls in front of them. For Pitcher, seeing involves a rather complicated set of conditions, one of which is that it "it looks to [the perceiver] that there is [an object

y] at place w where some aspect(s) or component(s) of his relevant perceptual belief is (are) true, and true, furthermore, of the x at u (or in direction u)."[19] That an infant has beliefs is perhaps made more plausible by these being *perceptual* beliefs. But that an infant has concepts of particular objects and places making it possible for it to look to him that there is a particular object at a particular place seems worthy of doubt.[20]

NOTES

[1] D. M. Armstrong, *Perception and the Physical World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961) and George Pitcher, *A Theory of Perception* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

[2] To mention only a few recent examples, in addition to Pitcher, see G. N. A. Vesey, *Perception* (Garden City N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1971); C. W. K. Mundle, *Perception: Facts and Theories* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); R. J. Hirst, *The Problems of Perception* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd. 1959).

[3] Cf. Pitcher, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

[4] See H. H. Price, *Perception* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1932), p. 4.

[5] Whether 'sensuousness' and 'intentionality' name two features of perceptual states, or only one, I shall not explore here. What is important is that these features (or this feature) have been alleged to be connected with the use of certain locutions employing the word 'look.' Pitcher attempts to analyse the locutions in terms of locutions employing the word 'belief.' I argue that no such analysis is possible. Thus, insofar as the sensuousness or intentionality of perception ride on 'look' locutions, I argue that they are still riding.

[6] Pitcher, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 85.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

[16] A sense-datum theorist, it is alleged, would analyse IIA as 'Q has a visual sense-datum of an x at u.' If we asked a sense-datum theorist what means by this sort of sense-datum, he would say that he means to specify just that sort of sense-datum a person has when it looks to him as if there is an x at u. He is therefore in the same circular position as is Pitcher.

Now this argument is unfair to the sense-datum theorist, and also unsatisfactory as a reply intended to get Pitcher off the hook. To begin with, no sense-datum theorist would take a statement like 'Q has a visual sense-datum of an x at u' as a sense-datum statement, since 'x' is a physical object term, and sense-datum theory strategy was to eliminate such terms. Sense-datum theorists would rather analyse IIA into statements like 'There is a green patch at such and such a position in Q's visual field.' There is some justice in saying that a series of such sense-datum statements is already a more thorough analysis than Pitcher offers, since the original physical object statement is replaced by a *number* of specific sense-datum statements.



Of course, the sense-datum theorist has in one way gotten no farther than Pitcher. He may have analysed 'tree look,' but not 'look' itself; sense-data seem fully as mysterious as looks. Still, two points in favor of sense-datum theory can be made here. First, sense-datum theorists do sometimes try to explain, without circularity, what sense-data are. They are sometimes said to be momentary, private entities, neither physical nor mental, really having the features objects only appear to have. Some sense-datum theorists don't specify the nature of sense-data. They merely say that we are all obviously acquainted with them whenever an object looks a certain way to us. Even this latter way of explaining their nature is not circular in the way Pitcher's account of perceptual beliefs is—for the 'looks' locution is not used to define sense-data but to refer to them.

[17] Pitcher, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 113.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

[20] Cf. Sibley's review of Armstrong's book, *Philosophical Review, 1964*, p. 406.

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